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JAPANESE ART.*

By SIR RUTHERFORD ALCOCK, K.C.B., D.C.L.



SINCE the first of these papers appeared in the *Art Journal* two separate works have been published on Japanese Art, and to some extent they have supplied the deficiency I noticed as a motive for returning to the subject. The elaborate work of Messrs. Audsley and Bowes, with its costly illustrations, though limited in the title-page to the "Ceramic Art of Japan," is by no means confined to porcelain and pottery. Both letterpress and plates refer in great detail to the enamels and *cloisonnés* of Japan; while the introductory essay takes in its scope the whole field of Japanese Art and Art-manufactures, together with the principles adopted, and the chief characteristics of their work. The second is a small volume, printed at New York, modestly entitled, "A Glimpse at the Art of Japan," by James Jackson Jarves. It is much more than a glimpse, however, and has, apparently, been written under conditions singularly well adapted to lead its author to take a wide range, and apply the canons of Art of the Western World to test the claims of the Japanese to have founded, without any communication with Europe, an Art-school of their own, essentially differing in principles and practice from any in the West. Though published in America, and probably intended in the first instance for an American public, the preface is dated from Florence, where the work itself seems to have been written. With the advantage of a residence in Japan of some duration, and a subsequent domicile at Florence, where he must be at home as an honorary member of the Academy of Fine Arts, and a writer of several works on Art, he has come to the task well prepared, and with all the preliminary qualifications required to do it ample justice. The publication of these two works renders it unnecessary to give much further extension to these articles. As regards the china, the pottery, and the faience of Japan, together with their *cloisonnés* and enamels, the subject may safely be left in Messrs. Audsley and Bowes's hands—to judge by the numbers already issued of the two volumes promised. Nothing can exceed the fidelity and beauty of the chromolithographic plates by Messrs. Didot Frères, Fils et Cie.; and nothing in the form of woodcuts or engravings, apart from colour, could give any adequate idea of the distinctive character and excellence of the work, into which striking contrasts and harmony of colours so largely enter. I propose, therefore, after devoting some space to the three classes not yet noticed, in which the Japanese have attained their highest power—that is, in metal, ivory, and lacquer works—and a few remarks on some subsidiary Art-manufactures, such as wall-papers, embossed and stencilled leathers (or rather incomparable imitations of these in their fibre-paper), embroidery, and textile fabrics, to close the series. The space taken up by the illustrations may prevent the whole of this, which I intend to be the concluding paper, appearing in the present number, but in that case the rest will follow without delay.

In bronze and other metals, the Japanese need fear no comparison, within a certain range of subjects, with the best work which Europe can show in any age. They have, it is true, nothing to put by the side of the *chefs-d'œuvre* of John of Bologna, Benvenuto Cellini, or Michael Angelo, or, indeed, many later artists; simply, it would seem, because they have never attempted to master the human figure, or acquire the power of drawing or modelling it with accuracy. Except for their idols—and these have a distinctly Indian origin and type—they never attempt large figures, nude or draped. But in artistic treatment in metals of small groups, and natural objects, such as are depicted in their woodcuts, they have attained very rare

excellence; and in nearly every department—in casting, engraving, chasing, inlaying, and damascening, they seem to have little, if anything, to learn from Europe. Of bronze-casting and moulding I consider them masters. They are equally capable of colossal and minute work, and I believe there are processes known to them of which we are wholly ignorant. In the Report of the Jurors of the International Exhibition of 1862, the numerous specimens of brooches, clasps, and medallions, in various metals, which I sent, together with two unique equestrian statuettes, standing about two feet high, were noticed in their award of a medal, in the following terms, under the heading "Japan:"—

"For a collection of bronzes of characteristic excellence. This collection is very remarkable: the smaller fancy objects, such as brooches and clasps, are admirably executed. In all the figures the national character is represented with perfect truth and expression. These objects are principally in iron, relieved by partial overlaying of gold and bronze. Great aptitude is evinced in these works; and Sir R. Alcock, to whom we are indebted for the collection, has rendered important service." And in some introductory remarks by the reporter of the jury, in which the whole exhibition, and the relative merits of the contributions from all countries, is cursorily passed in review, it is again adverted to under the head "Japan:" "For the exhibition from which country we are entirely indebted to Sir R. Alcock, constitutes a surprisingly interesting contribution." I should not have cited the words of the official report, had I not observed in the "Ceramic Art of Japan," by Messrs. Audsley and Bowes, and still more recently in the preface to a catalogue of Japanese works of Art now on exhibition at the Bethnal Green Museum, that to France, and a French Minister at the court of Japan, is attributed the first introduction of the artistic works of Japan to the notice of Europe. This, it will be seen, is not only substantially incorrect, but the exact reverse of the fact. The French collection was exhibited at the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, while the collection made by myself when British Minister in Japan, for the express purpose of calling attention to the artistic works of the Japanese, was exhibited in London in the Exhibition of 1862. And far from failing to attract notice, the "Japan Court" was one of the most popular in the Exhibition, and a lecture was delivered by Mr. Leighton at the Royal Institution the following year on "Japanese Art," founded upon the works which had been exhibited. Any credit, therefore, that may be due for priority, belongs unquestionably to England, and not to France.

To return to the work in metals. A very competent judge in such matters, Mr. Hunt, of the firm of Hunt and Roskell, and one of the jurors I believe, in answer to an inquiry whether the artists and skilled workers in metal employed by the first jewellers and silversmiths in London could produce similar specimens of their art, said they might, but at such a price as to preclude any chance of sale. Now, the brooches and other articles I referred to had cost in that day a few "boos" each—say from ten to twenty shillings. He also added that, "after careful examination, he was convinced the Japanese were in possession of some means not known in Europe of forming amalgams and overlaying one metal on another, and in the most minute and delicate details; introducing into the same subject, not covering an inch, silver, gold, bronze, &c., so as to make a variegated picture of divers colours."

I had selected a few of the finer specimens in my possession to be engraved, but I am satisfied, on further reflection, that nothing short of the highest work of the graver, aided by colour, could give any fair idea of the minuteness, delicacy, and graphic power shown in the originals; and to produce them in any imperfect way would not only mislead, but do great

* For preceding articles on this subject see *Art Journal* for April, July, and November, 1875; February and April, 1876.

injustice to the Japanese, to whose skill and artistic power they owe their excellence.

The description Mr. Audsley gives of this finer metallic work furnishes more specific information on the processes followed than I have found elsewhere. He says in his lecture:—

“Perhaps the most characteristic of all their metallurgic works is that called by them *syakfdo*. In this, numerous metals and



Fig. 1.

alloys are associated, the designs being produced in colours through the agency of the various coloured metals: white being represented by silver, yellow by gold, black by platina, all shades of dull red by copper and its allies, brown by bronze, and blue by steel. Gold, silver, and polished steel, of course, represent themselves in designs as well as abstract colours. A red garment, embroidered with gold and clasped with silver, would be executed in red-coloured copper, inlaid with gold, and furnished with a silver brooch. The sword in the hand of a warrior would be in polished steel, and, if bloody, would have red copper inlaid on it. These instances will suffice to illustrate the general mode of producing coloured designs by the exclusive

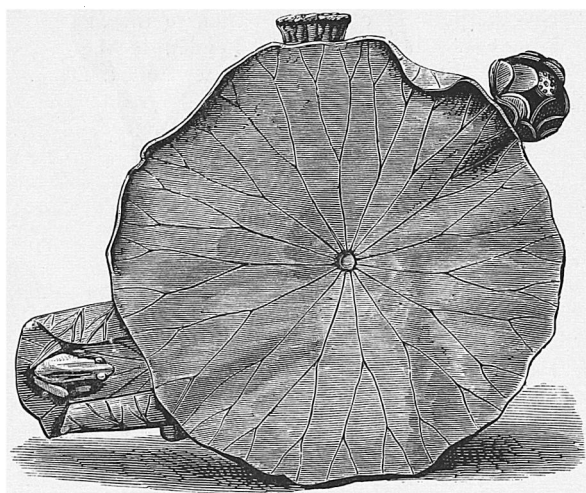


Fig. 2.

use of metals. I have seen many beautiful specimens of *syakfdo*, and can bear witness to their faultless execution.”

How they came to attain this perfection of workmanship in these particular works is partly to be accounted for by the fact that the most valued of a Daimio's possessions was once a highly tempered and trustworthy sword—or, rather, a pair of swords, since the privileged classes always wore two—possessions which were transmitted from father to son, and treasured as heirlooms. They gave very high prices to the most celebrated armourers for these weapons—as much, I have been informed,

as £500—and it was their habit to have the guard inlaid with the finest designs in relief, and with one or more of these medallions or *syakfdo* on the handle. Hence the demand, as with the knights and nobles of the Middle Ages for the finest workmanship on their armour, of damascene, inlaying and *repoussé* designs. Their tobacco-pouches were similarly ornamented with medallion clasps. As a Japanese noble, however wealthy or high in rank, wore no other ornament on his person, they could afford in these two appendages to lavish any sum that could command the highest art. And the supply appears to have answered to the demand.

When the best work was not so rare as it has now become, and it was possible to find pieces of a past age far exceeding in value, as in beauty of form and workmanship, any of the productions of a more recent date, I obtained many for the Exhibition of 1862. Whoever possesses any of these should value them highly, for, to all appearance, they can never be reproduced, whatever price might be offered, for the artists capable of such work no longer exist.

This marvellous delicacy of touch and execution is the more remarkable, because in the fashion of their tools, as in their smelting and refining processes, so far as I have had any opportunity of observing, all are of the most primitive kind. Their ovens, furnaces, &c. are simple and rude; yet, judging by the work, they must have a perfect command of their materials, from the ironstone to the steel of their sword-blades. If we could obtain a fuller knowledge of the processes employed, it is possible we might learn much that was interest-

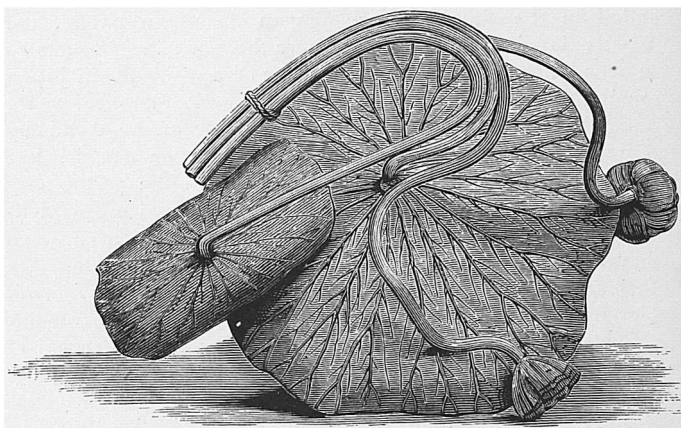


Fig. 3.

ing if not valuable, both to British metallurgists and to iron-smelters. There is a mixture of reddish-yellow and dark black-green bronze, as if the two metals had been with difficulty stirred up and mixed together when in a semi-fluid state. As to their bronzes, while they rival the Chinese in the excellence of the metal and their command over the material, whether in casting or chasing, I think they surpass them, in this as in many other materials, by the variety, fancy, and grace of design.

As a means of comparison I have had engraved one of the finest specimens of Chinese bronze of an early date, now in my possession (Fig. 1). It represents a flat peach, peculiar, I believe, to the north of China, a branch and leaves forming the handle; and a richly chased band round the centre and the top, which forms a lid, represents, with the utmost delicacy, a scroll-work. The colour of the bronze is very rich, and over the surface are interspersed, irregularly, gold patches, as if nuggets had been embedded in the substance of the bronze when being cast, and afterwards polished down to the surface. This, indeed, is the account given by the Chinese from whom it was obtained at Peking. But as the signet underneath indicates an imperial destination, and it is certainly not modern, it has probably at one time or other adorned a room in the palace, and either found its way to some mandarin as a gift, or otherwise got into the hands of the curiosity dealers, who, like our jewellers and silversmiths, have many old and rare things

brought to them in pledge as a means of raising money, which are never redeemed, and so get into the hands of collectors. Nothing can exceed the finish of detail and surface, or the taste of the whole design. The stand is carved in a dark hard wood susceptible of a fine polish, called by the French *bois d'aigle*, and, so far as I can ascertain, peculiar to China. The bronze is some eighteen inches in length and eleven in depth.

However much they may have borrowed from the Chinese, in bronze-casting they seem to have nothing to learn from Europe. They not only produce all the delicate moulding of the lotus-leaf—by some process unknown—but produce relief ornamentation by cutting the surrounding metal away, as Mr. Audsley has rightly pointed out. Such relieved work they further enrich with the burin, or damascene with gold and silver. Repoussé work is said to be known and practised by them, but I cannot say I have ever seen any clearly marked specimen. They are

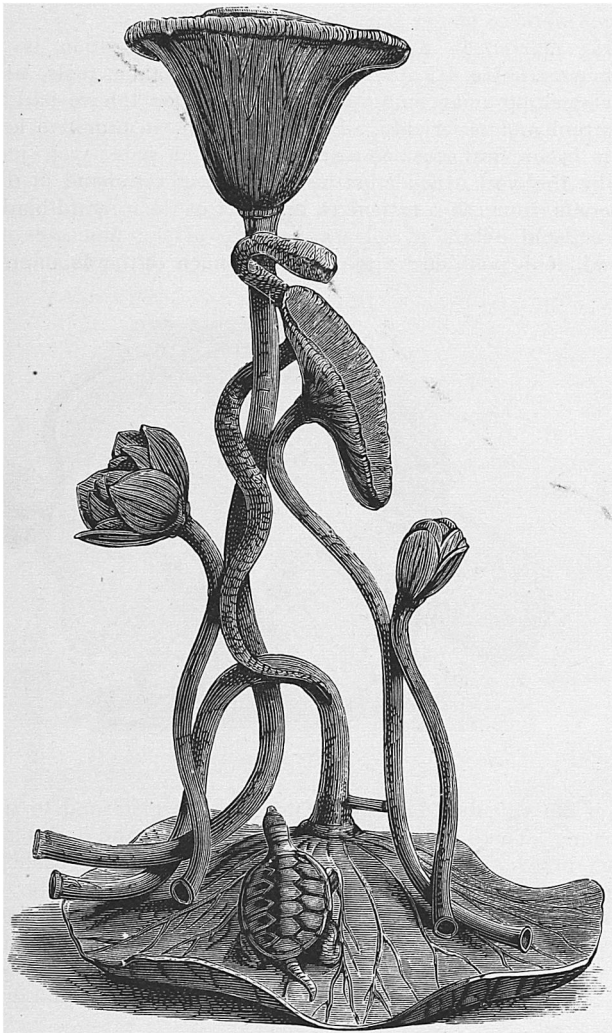


Fig. 4.

much in the habit of graving diaper and other patterns on bronzes and filling them up with silver wire, with which they cover large surfaces in salvers or vases with good effect, and very original designs or patterns.

I cannot do better than make selection, as a subject of comparison, of a lotus-leaf and buds with seed-pod, in bronze, the work of a Japanese artist, of about similar size to the Chinese peach (Figs. 2 and 3, showing front and back view). I have seen no more perfect specimen of bronze-modelling or casting. The leaf, naturally so graceful, has preserved its best characteristics, its undulating curves, and even the very texture of leaf and bud and pod, with veins and markings; while a perfect little frog sits on the half-folded young leaf coming from beneath. It is the very impress of the plant in its least studied form transposed into metal, and to all appearance it must have been

moulded on the leaf; but how effected, or in what material, it is hard to divine. It is distinctive of Japanese work, and in this asserts a laudable pre-eminence over Chinese productions, that



Fig. 5.

although it is intended to present only one, the upper and cup-like, surface of the leaf to view, the under surface (see Fig. 3)



Fig. 6.

is not less perfectly rendered. So much is this the case that it is difficult to avoid a feeling of regret in putting it down on the table, by which the reverse surface is out of sight; and my

friend General Malcolm, with a somewhat similar work in bronze, has accordingly had it arranged so as to show both surfaces at once by placing it edgewise.

In the same spirit is conceived a bronze candlestick (Fig. 4), formed also out of the lotus-leaf and stalk. It stands ten inches high, and the seed-pod forms the socket for the candle. The mythic tortoise, emblem of longevity, is also here resting

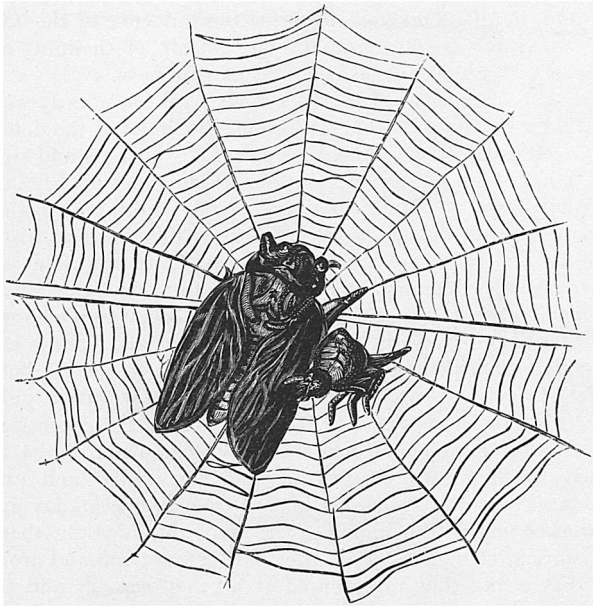


Fig. 7.

on the leaf which forms the base, while a snake curls round the stalks of the plant. The casting is not so wonderful as in the larger piece (Figs. 2 and 3), but nothing can well be more graceful in design.

Among the very best specimens of Japanese treatment of the figure in bronze, combining vigorous action and expression with

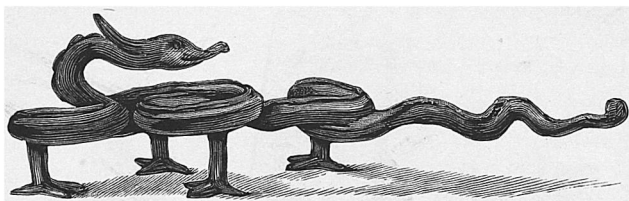


Fig. 8.

excellence in the workmanship, which I have seen is the warrior represented in Figs. 5 and 6. The whole piece stands some three feet high, and is like in subject to St. George and the Dragon. Their God of War, or divinely descended warrior, has been engaged in battle with a monster in semi-human shape, and he is standing victorious over it with his foot on the prostrate

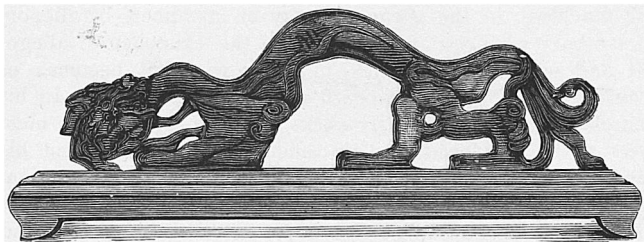


Fig. 9.

body, preparing to give the *coup de grâce* with the sword in his right hand. This beautiful bronze is, I believe, the property of a Dutch gentleman formerly resident in Japan, by whom it has been sent on loan to the South Kensington Museum.

Their fancy is fertile in suggesting quaint or graceful adaptations of natural objects for practical application to common

uses. Fig. 7 may serve as an example. Here is a cobweb, with a bee entangled in its meshes, which is made to cover the hasp or latch on two halves of a sliding-door, one half of the bronze remaining on the fixed leaf while the other is drawn away. The workmanship both of the web and the insects is very fine. I am indebted to Mr. Alt's collection for this specimen. I have, in my own possession, several equally ingenious and fanciful adaptations. Among others, an oblong gourd, with a few pine-leaves, winding partially round, by the tendril of which it may be looped on a nail against the wall, so as to form a jar

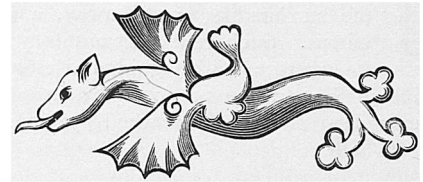


Fig. 10.

for flowers. Here (Fig. 8) is a dragon-like snake, twisted into a pen-rest, to stand on a writing-table. A less gracefully conceived monster is represented in Fig. 9, intended to serve either as a weight or a pen-rest.

Fig. 10 shows a small bronze, which might have figured on some ancient gothic cathedral, and is treated in a thoroughly conventional style.

I will only add one more as a specimen of the labour and



Fig. 11.

elaborate workmanship the Japanese often bestow even on their utensils. Fig. 11 is taken from a teapot of small dimensions, in bronze. It is covered with very exquisite *basso relievos* of the dragon, and a great variety of patterns, while the legs are formed of three bottle-shaped gourds very gracefully adapted.

(To be continued.)